

## A *Banner* Cruise May 21

Article Teaser: Was the seizure of the USS *Pueblo* a case of mistaken identity?

One of the more unfortunate events in U.S. cryptologic history — the North Korean seizure of the USS *Pueblo* -- is commemorated this year on its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. To summarize the event, on January 23, 1968, the North Koreans seized the USS *Pueblo*, a U.S. intelligence-gathering vessel, in international waters off the North Korean coast, killing one crewmember, capturing the rest. This event became a terrible intelligence disaster for the United States, with the Soviet bloc now having unprecedented direct access to various naval cryptosystems as well as cryptologists. The crew was held until December, and not until the U.S. government formally “apologized” for spying. The ship never was returned and remains a North Korean propaganda trophy to this day.

This article though is about another ship—the USS *Banner*, which faced a similar situation, but with a different ending.



The *Banner* had served in the Southwest Pacific during the closing days of World War II, interestingly as an Army vessel with a Coast Guard crew. It was purchased by the Navy after the war and was converted into a light auxiliary cargo vessel. In the mid-1960s, the ship was converted for electronic intelligence and reclassified as an Auxilliary

General Environmental Research (AGER) vessel.

During the 1960s, the Navy experimented with specialized floating intelligence-gathering platforms. The most well-known of these, Technical Research Ships (TRS), had often been World War II Liberty ships, essentially freight haulers, now

refurbished for intelligence collection missions. One of the first TRS, the USS *Oxford*, distinguished itself during the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The USS *Liberty*, attacked by the Israelis on June 8, 1967, during the Six Day War in the Middle East, was another TRS.\*

AGERs, another 1960s Naval SIGINT initiative, were smaller, and slower than the TRS. The AGER's primary function was to provide direct naval support, with a secondary national tasking mission from NSA. Although some compromises were reached that gave NSA more of a say in AGER missions, NSA remained an uneasy partner. The *Banner* was the first AGER. The *Pueblo* was the second (AGER-2).

The *Banner* took the same route that the *Pueblo* followed about a year earlier. The *Banner*, at that time, had been harassed by the North Koreans but was not further molested. In January 1968, might the North Koreans have mistaken the *Pueblo* for the *Banner*? According to debriefs of *Pueblo* crew members, the North Koreans, well aware of the *Banner* and its activities, had hoped to seize it. Fortunately, for the *Banner*, it did not happen. North Korean communications at the time revealed confusion when they reported the *Pueblo*'s hull number, because they expected to see AGER-1 rather than AGER-2.

The *Banner*'s good fortune would continue. Shortly after the seizure of the *Pueblo*, with tensions extremely high, the United States sent the *Banner* back out there on an intelligence mission — to cruise off the North Korean coast — this time with a heavy, armed escort, which had not existed for the unlucky *Pueblo*. The *Banner* would once again escape attack.

The *Banner*'s luck finally ran out. In 1969, the Navy deemed it unfit for further service and it was decommissioned in Japan in November 1969. In fact, the Navy had decided that year to end this entire initiative with the Technical Research Ships and AGARs, judging it to be too expensive. This effectively brought to an end a decade of Navy experimentation with World War II-era vessels refurbished as special SIGINT collection platforms.

\*The Liberty was actually not a Liberty class ship but rather a Victory ship. Victory ships, built towards the end of the war, were faster, larger, and more durable than the former.

(U//FOUO) Sources: *American Cryptology during the Cold War, 1945-1989; Book II: Centralization Wins, 1960-1972* by Tom Johnson; USS Banner Wikipedia information; Liberty and Victory ships, National Park Service information

**502 caption: The USS *Banner* at sea.**